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ABSTRACT

The results of a statewide survey of the professional preparation and current leadership practices of middle and intermediate school principals in relation to reading programs are described in this paper. The first section of the paper describes the survey questions in the areas of professional preparation of middle school principals, current leadership practices of principals, and current reading programs. The second section provides an interpretation of the responses from the survey. The third section summarizes the results, which indicated that the state's middle school principals were not adequately prepared to provide creditable leadership of reading programs. In addition, this section offers six recommendations for addressing the problem. (HTH)

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Survey of Middle School Principals in the State of Virginia

Dr. James L. Laffey and Donna G. Laffey

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Dr. James L. Laffey and Donna G. Laffey

Special Note

The Board of Directors of the Virginia State Reading Association requested that the authors publish this report in an issue of *Reading in Virginia*. The survey was conducted by the V.S.R.A. Research Committee members during 1983-84 with Dr. James L. Laffey serving as Chairperson of the Committee.

Introduction

During the 1983-84 school year, a survey of middle and intermediate school principals was conducted by the Research Committee of the Virginia State Reading Association. The project was undertaken for the purpose of collecting data relevant to middle and intermediate school reading programs in the following three areas:

1) professional preparation of principals,
2) current leadership practices of principals, and
3) descriptive information on current reading programs.

The survey was sent to the principals of all the 218 middle and intermediate schools in the state of Virginia. Responses were returned by 156 of the principals in the state's middle and intermediate schools. This response rate represents 75% of all those who received the questionnaire.

The report is organized in the following three sections. *Section I* will contain basic descriptive data organized in the following manner. The responses to the questions on the survey will be categorized into the three basic areas relating to the purposes of the study noted in the introduction (i.e. (a) professional preparation of principals, (b) current leadership practices of principals, and (c) descriptive information on current reading programs). *Section II* of the study will deal with interpreting the results of the survey following the same organizational pattern already noted. *Section III* will deal with a summary of the results and recommendations which seem to be warranted as a result of the findings from the survey. The recommendations will be concerned with both program planning and suggestions for further study.

SECTION I
BASIC DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Professional Preparation of Middle School Principals

The following questions were included in this section pertaining to the professional preparation and experience of middle school principals: Questions 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 11 and 25.

Question 1 regarding the number of years of middle school classroom teaching experience the individuals had before becoming principals disclosed that 19.9% of the principals had no middle school classroom teaching experience. 16.7% had one to three years of middle school classroom teaching experience, 39.7% had four to seven years, 16% had eight or more years, and 7.1% had 13 or more years of middle school classroom teaching experience.

Question 2 which dealt with the number of reading courses taken as part of their advanced training to become principals, had the following responses: 58% of the respondents had taken no reading courses, 17.8% had taken one reading course, 13.4% had taken two courses, 5.1% had taken three courses, and 5.7% had taken four or five reading courses.

Question 4 which dealt with the academic degree held by the principals revealed that .6% had a Bachelor's Degree plus less than 30 credit hours, 80.9% had a Master's Degree and Administrative Certificate, 9.6% had an Education Specialist Degree, and 8.9% had a Doctorate Degree.

Question 7 involved the number of reading courses the individuals had taken prior to teaching in the middle school. Responses indicated that 64.1% of the principals had taken no reading courses prior to teaching in a middle school, 14.4% had taken one reading course, 11.1% had taken two courses, 3.9% had taken three courses, and 6.5% had taken four or more reading courses prior to teaching in a middle school.

Question 9 which dealt with endorsements included on the principals' Virginia Teaching Certificates yielded the following responses: 5.1% had primary classroom teacher endorsements, 18.5% had elementary classroom teacher endorsements, 53.5% had middle school teacher endorsements, and 22.9% had high school teacher endorsements.

Question 11 which dealt with whether the principals had ever been reading specialists or reading teachers yielded the following responses: 93.6% of the respondents indicated that they had not been reading specialists or reading teachers while 6.4% indicated that they had been reading specialists or reading teachers.

Question 25 regarding the number of reading courses that the individuals had taken since becoming principals brought the following responses: 66.7% of the principals had taken no reading courses, 16% had taken one course, 9.6% had taken two courses, 7.1% had taken three courses, and 0.6% of the principals had taken four reading courses since becoming a principal.

Current Leadership Practices of Principals

In this section relating to the principals leadership practices the following questions were included: Questions 3, 5, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 27, 28 and 30.

Question 3 concerning the average class size of the school's special reading classes (such as Chapter 1, remedial, etc.) produced the following responses: .6% of the principals indicated that the average class size was 2-4 students, 21.3% reported classes of 5-8 students, 32.1% reported classes of 9-12 students, 41.9% reported classes of 13-20 students, and 3.2% indicated that the average class size of the special reading classes was 21-30 students.

Question 5 concerning providing special time for the entire school to engage in sustained silent reading brought the following responses: 60.8% of the principals said that they did not provide this time while 39.2% of the principals reported

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that they did provide time for the entire school to engage in sustained silent reading.

Question 13 regarding the frequency with which principals observe classroom instruction elicited a variety of responses: 24% observed classroom instruction 6-10 times a week, 35.6% observed 3-5 times a week, 24% observed 1-2 times a week, 4.5% observed 20 times a year or less, and 11% observed about once a month.

Question 14 which dealt with ranking the various roles of the principals (i.e. as school administrator, as instructional leader or disciplinarian) 128 or more than 81% of the principals ranked their role as instructional leader as the most important. Only 28 principals ranked their role as school administrator as their most important role. When considering the principals first and second choices of their rankings 156 or all 100% of the principals ranked their role as instructional leader as their most important role (i.e. 128 ranked it first and 28 ranked it second).

Question 15 which asked about the methods or technique the principals use to evaluate school reading programs, 131 or about 84% of the principals indicated that they used a variety of techniques to evaluate their programs. The three most frequently reported responses in descending order were: observing classroom teaching practices — 125 responses, analyzing student test scores — 123 responses, and conferring with the entire school staff to determine ways to improve the program — 92 responses.

Question 16 which involved identifying school personnel who initiate change in reading programs brought the following responses: 40% of the principals said change was initiated by the reading teacher, 6.5% said change was initiated by the classroom teacher, 11.6% said change was initiated by the reading specialist, 27.7% said that change was initiated by the instructional supervisor, and 14.2% of the principals indicated that change was initiated by "other" personnel.

Question 17 which dealt with ranking the five academic subjects from most important to least important had the principals responding as follows: 80% ranked reading as the most important subject, 6.4% ranked all subjects equal, 5.8% ranked reading as second most important, and 4.7% ranked math as the most important, less than 10% ranked English, Science and Health as the most important subjects.

Question 18 which involved estimating the percentage of students in the principals' schools with severe reading deficiencies (two or more grade levels below grade placement) elicited a variety of responses: 24.7% of the principals estimated that 1-5% of their students had severe reading deficiencies, 27.3% estimated that 11-20% of their students had severe deficiencies, and 13.0% of the principals estimated that 21-30% of their students had severe reading deficiencies.

Question 21 which dealt with subject-matter teachers being required to participate in in-service courses on reading in content fields produced responses which indicated that such courses are required in 58.9% of the schools and are not required in 41.1% of the middle schools.

Question 22 involving subject-matter teachers being required to integrate the teaching of reading with subject matter material elicited the following responses: such integration is required in 72.2% of the middle schools and is not required in 22.8% of the middle schools.

Question 23 which concerned the provision of preparation time for teachers to develop instructional tools which bring reading activities together with subject matter materials yielded the following responses: 83.4% of the principals replied that such time was provided while 16.6% indicated that such time was not provided.

Question 27 which dealt with strategies that principals would consider reasonable for bringing the school's reading program to the public's attention yielded the following responses: 45.6% of the principals indicated that reporting student progress in the newspaper would be a reasonable strategy, 15.4% indicated that using parents as tutors would be a reasonable technique, 12.8% indicated a preference for having special school assemblies to recognize student involvement in reading, 14.8% preferred Read-a-thons, and 11.4% of the principals felt that parent conferences would be a reasonable technique for bringing the school reading program to the attention of the public.

Question 28 which dealt with strategies for bringing the school reading program to the attention of the public that the principals had actually used brought the following responses: 52.6% of the principals had reported student progress in the newspaper, 15.1% had used parents as tutors, 14.5% had held a Read-a-Thon, 8.6% had held special assemblies to recognize student involvement in reading, and 9.2% had used parent conferences to bring the school reading program to the attention of the public.

Question 30 which dealt with the activities that would enable the principals to personally improve their leadership capabilities for the school's reading program brought the following responses: 46% of the principals indicated that the school district should make more time and resources available for them to evaluate and make changes where necessary in their reading program, 22.7% advocated participating in special weekend reading-leadership seminars, 12% indicated that taking part in special in-service reading courses for principals would be beneficial, 10% indicated an interest in participating with selected staff members in special workshops designed to improve the school reading program, and 9.3% advocated enrolling in a university reading course or courses.

Descriptive Information on Current Reading Programs

The responses to the following questions were included in this section of the report: 6, 8, 10, 12, 19, 20, 24, 26 and 29.

Question 6 which dealt with providing reading classes for all students in the school yielded the following responses: 59.3% of the principals indicated that reading classes were not provided for all students while 40.7% indicated that reading classes were provided for all students.

Question 8 regarding the average class size in their schools produced the following responses: 7.0% of the principals reported an average class size of 15-20 students, 57.0% reported 21-25 students, 34.8% reported 26-30 students, and 1.3% reported an average class size of 31-35 students.

Question 10 pertaining to the graded organizational patterns of the schools produced the following responses: 37% of the principals indicated their schools had grades 6, 7 and 8, 29.5% had grades 7 and 8, 25% had grades 7, 8 and 9, 5% had grades 8 and 9, 2% had grade 8 only, and 1.5% of the principals reported that their schools had graded organizational patterns of grades 6 through 9.

Question 12 pertaining to reading programs for disabled readers produced the following results: 90.8% of the principals indicated that they had an organized reading program for disabled readers while 9.2% of the principals indicated that their schools did not have such a program.

Question 19 which dealt with current enrollment figures produced the following responses: 17.1% of the middle school principals had enrollments of 500 or fewer students, 41.8% had enrollments of 501-800 students, 28.5% had enrollments of 801-1200 students, 7.6% had enrollments of 1201-1500 students, and 5.1% of the middle school principals indicated that their school had enrollments of over 1500 students.

Question 20 which concerned how the central office administrators treat reading yielded the following responses: 40.8% of the principals replied that the central office administrators viewed reading as one important aspect of the curriculum, 35.7% indicated that reading was considered equal with the other basic skills, and 23.6% of the principals indicated that the central office administrators viewed reading to be the highest priority concern in the school system.

Question 24 which dealt with estimating the number of students who had mild reading deficiencies (reading a year or less below grade placement elicited a wide range of estimates: 35.3% of the principals estimated that 1-10% of their students had mild reading deficiencies, 39.1% estimated 11-20%, 19.2% estimated 21-30%, and 5.1% of the principals estimated that 31% or more of their students had mild reading deficiencies.

Question 26 concerning funded programs which support reading teachers, reading aides, or some form of reading instruction produced the following responses: 40% of the principals indicated that they had Title IV C, 16% had funding from ESAA Title VII, 5.7% had funding from the Right-to-Read Improvement Programs, and 37.9% of the principals indicated that they had the other funding.

Question 29 which concerned activities that the principals felt would improve the school reading program brought the following responses: 71.9% of the principals advocated changing state certification for all pre-service content teachers so that they would be required to have at least one course in reading, 13.1% of the principals advocated changing the state school funding formula so that specific funds would be made available for reading improvement, 11.1% advocated making provision for additional support for in-service courses for content area teachers, 3.3% advocated additional training for the school's reading teacher, and .7% of the principals advocated provision for the school district's reading supervisor-specialist to have advanced training in content area reading instruction.

SECTION II
INTERPRETATION OF THE RESPONSES FROM THE SURVEY

The interpretation section of the report will be organized in the same three sub-section noted in Section I. It will deal with a) professional preparation of principals, b) current leadership practices, and c) descriptive information on middle school reading programs.

Professional Preparation of Principals

The first part of this section will deal specifically with a) the nature of the principals' prior teaching experience, b) the principals' endorsements and academic degrees and c) the number of reading courses taken by the respondents prior to and since they became principals.

In many instances it appears that the principals' prior middle school teaching experience (question 1) does not warrant their current position as principal. Nearly 20% of the principals had no middle school teaching experience. More than 16% of the principals have had three or less years of teaching experience in the middle school. Another 40% have had four to seven years of experience while the remaining 23.7% have had eight or more years of teaching experience in the middle school prior to becoming a principal.

Furthermore, the endorsements on the principals' Virginia Teaching Certificates (question 9) lead one to additional observations regarding their current positions as middle school principals. Only slightly more than half, 53.5%, actually had middle school teaching endorsements while nearly 23% have high school endorsements, 18.5% have elementary endorsements, and 5% have primary teaching endorsments.

While it is possible to argue that it is not the amount of experience the principals have had but the quality of the experience, it seems that the brevity of experiences reported in this survey, coupled with the lack of academic preparation in the critical curricular area of reading (questions 2, 7, and 25) results in a majority of middle school principals being inadequately prepared to fulfill the instructional leadership role necessary to develop strong and effective reading programs in the middle schools of Virginia.

More than 58% of the principals have had no reading courses as part of their preparation to become principals (question 2). Another 64% of the principals had taken no reading courses prior to teaching in the middle school (question 7). Finally, more than 66% of the principals have taken no reading courses since becoming principals (question 25). Simply stated, a majority of the principals in Virginia's middle schools had taken no reading courses before they taught in the middle school, nor had they taken any reading courses while they were preparing to become principals, nor have they taken any courses since they have become principals.

Following the above information, perhaps it will seem almost meaningless to report that 93.6% of the principals indicated that not only had they never been reading specialists but they also had not been reading teachers (question 11). Only 6.4% indicated that they had served as reading specialists or reading teachers.

While it is not the intent of the writers of this report to make rash generalizations concerning the middle school principals preparation and experiences relating to the leadership role in middle school reading programs, it seems safe to conclude that a majority of the middle school principals who responded to this survey, and who are, incidentally, representative of the middle school principals in Virginia, are not prepared adequately either through their experiential background as teachers nor through their academic preparation in university or in-service course work to assume an effective leadership role in reading program development.

It should be noted though, on the positive side, that there is a small core of the middle school principals who are well-prepared experientially and academically to assume an effective leadership role in reading program development. Some of the preparation and experience of these principals include the following: 7% had 13 or more years of middle school teaching experience, 6.5% had taken four or more reading courses while preparing to become principals, 7.6% had taken three or more reading courses since becoming principals, and finally, 6.4% indicated that they had been reading teachers or reading specialists prior to becoming principals. Again, the writers of this report do state, with a degree of caution, that these experiential and professional preparation characteristics do not insure that any individual principal will be able to assume

an effective leadership role because of having any one or any combination of the above noted characteristics, but they do indicate a degree of professional interest and preparation to assume the role more effectively than those principals without such preparation and experience.

On the surface it appears that a majority of the principals have the appropriate academic credentials (question 4) since 80% of them reported having a masters' degree and administrative certification. In fact, nearly 20% exceed the state requirements for certification as a middle school principal (9.6% had an educational specialist degree and 8% had a doctorate degree). However, these data actually camouflage the principals' lack of academic preparation in reading, lack of reading teaching experience, lack of middle school teaching experience, and lack of middle school teaching endorsements. In other words, the data related to the principals' academic degrees clearly do not suggest the severe limitations of their academic and experiential backgrounds for administering middle school reading programs. More importantly, however, it should be pointed out that the principals are only partially responsible for their limited academic backgrounds in reading since in the State of Virginia, principals are not required to take any reading courses either in their preparation to become principals or during their tenure as principals.

Current Leadership Practices of Principals

This part of the report will deal with interpreting the principals responses to questions 3, 5, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28 and 30.

The middle school principals appear to give some direct leadership to reading programs development in their schools since in fact 1) more than 60% (question 5) reported that they provide time for their entire schools to engage in sustained silent reading, 2) more than 50% (question 13) reported that they visited classrooms to observe instruction one to five times per week, 3) more than 80% (question 14) ranked their role as instructional leader to be their most important role in the school, 4) more than 84% reported that they evaluated their reading programs (question 15) using a variety of techniques, 5) more than 80% ranked reading as the most important subject (question 17) in the school's curriculum, 6) more than 58% of the principals (question 21) required their subject matter teachers to participate in in-service courses on content reading, 7) more than 72% of the principals require their subject matter teachers to integrate the teaching of reading with subject matter materials (question 22), 8) more than 83% (question 23) of the principals provided their subject matter teachers with time to develop instructional tools which bring reading and subject matter materials together, 9) more than 52% of the principals (question 28) reported using effective techniques for bringing the schools reading program to the attention of the public, 10) a little less than half (46%) of the principals (question 30) indicated that their school district should make more time and resources available for them to evaluate and make changes in their reading programs.

Even though the principals do employ some apparently sound leadership practices in their school reading program, it is obvious that there are some severe instructional problems in the schools as a result of some very unsound leadership practices. For example, more than 73% of the principals indicated that the average class size for their special reading classes ranged anywhere from 9 to 20 students (question 3). Since most special reading classes at the middle school level deal with severely disabled readers (i.e. 2 to 5 grade levels below their grade placement), class sizes that are as large as those indicated by the principals are inappropriate. Severely disabled readers need a reading program which is highly individualized thus requiring much smaller classes than those indicated in the responses to the survey.

It appears that the principals are not very knowledgeable about the extent and nature of the reading problems in their schools since most of the principals were unable to give an accurate estimate of the number of pupils with mild reading deficiencies (question 24). In addition very few of the principals were able to give accurate estimates of the percentage of students with severe reading deficiencies. Over 58% of the principals estimated that between 1 and 10% of the students had severe deficiencies. This is somewhat contradictory to the opinion of Dr. Albert Harris, the noted reading scholar, who estimates that between 10 and 15% of the student population have reading problems severe enough to require remedial reading instruction.

Furthermore, even though it is apparent that a majority of the middle school principals are inadequately prepared to provide effective leadership to their schools reading program, only a small number—less than 10% (question 30) were willing to make an effort (i.e. by taking university reading courses which require both time and effort) to acquire the knowledge necessary to effective program leadership in reading.

Finally, it appears that the principals give "lip service" to the importance of reading in their schools' curriculum. Some indication of this "lip service" is provided by noting their responses to question 16 which dealt with who was responsible for initiating changes in the school reading program. It appears that the principals turn this responsibility over to others—the reading teacher (40% of the time), the reading specialist (11.6% of the time) and the instructional supervisor (27.7% of the time).

Information on Current Reading Programs

Responses to the following questions were included in this section of the report. (Question 6, 8, 10, 12, 19, 20, 26 and 29).

The current enrollment figures indicated that 41.8% of the schools have somewhere between 500 and 800 students; more than 28% had enrollments of between 800-1200 students; 7.6% of the schools had enrollments of between 1200 to 1500 students; 5.1% of the schools had enrollments of over 1500 students, and 17.1% of the middle schools had enrollments of 500 or fewer students (question 19). It is important to note that more than 59% of the principals indicated (question 6) that reading classes were not provided for all the students in their schools.

The organization patterns in the schools vary considerably; 37% of the schools have grades 6, 7 and 8; 29.5% have grades 7 and 8, 5% have grades 7, 8 and 9; 5% have grades 8 and 9; 2% have grades 8 only and 1.5% have grades 6 through 9.

Class size in the schools appears to be very manageable in most instances since (question 8) 7% of the principals reported an average class size of 15-20 students, 57% reported an average class size of 21-25 students, 34.8% reported a class size of 26-30 students and only 1.3% reported an average class size of 31-35 students.

A very significant statistic reported by the principals relates to the number of schools which have special reading programs for disabled readers (question 12). In response to this question, 90.8% of the principals indicated that they had an organized reading program for disabled readers while only 9.2% indicated that their school did not have such a program.

The principals perceived that the central office administration treated reading in the following manner: over 40% of the principals responded that the central office administration viewed reading as one important aspect of the curriculum, more than 35% indicated that reading was considered to be equal with the other basic skills and more than 23% indicated that the central office administrators viewed reading as the highest priority concern in the school system. This is an interesting contrast with the principals own ranking of reading (question 17) since 80% of the principals ranked reading as the most important subject in the middle school curriculum, yet less than one fourth of the principals feel that the central office administration place a similar priority on reading.

In response to a question concerning funding (question 26) to support reading teachers, reading aides, or some form of reading instruction, the principals indicated at a remarkably high level (more than 99%) that such funding was available from various sources: Title IV C (40%), ESAA Title VII (16%), Right to Read Improvement Programs (5.7%), and Other Sources (37.9%). The significant statistic in this case appears to be the Other Sources category suggesting in most instances that support comes from the local school system.

A final question which dealt with programs concerned activities the principals felt would improve the school reading program. One response to this question which has had the support of the Virginia State Reading Association and its Standards and Ethics committee relates to the principals (71.9%) advocating a change in state certification requirements for all pre-service teachers so that they (the teachers) would be required to have at least one course in reading. Other notable responses by the principals to this question indicated that they advocated 1) making provision for additional support for in-service courses for content area teachers (11.1%), 2) additional training for the school's reading teachers (3.3%) and 3) advanced training in content area reading instruction for the school district's supervisors.

SECTION III
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of the results of the survey clearly indicate that a majority of the middle school principals in the state of Virginia are not adequately prepared, either academically through formal course work in reading or experientially through classroom teaching experiences, to provide creditable leadership for middle school reading programs. Such programs require some knowledge of reading instruction as it is organized through basal reading systems in most elementary and middle schools in the state and some knowledge of reading instruction as it should be integrated with subject matter instruction in every classroom and course offered in the middle schools of the State.

Recommendation 1

That middle school principals, as part of their preparation to become school administrators, should be required to take a series of three or four reading courses which would enable them to become knowledgeable about reading and reading instruction as it should be implemented in the entire middle school curriculum. At least one of the reading courses in the recommended series should deal with reading in the subject matter classroom. A second course should focus on the organization, administration and supervision of reading programs since such a course could provide the principals with the necessary tools for evaluating on-going school reading programs. Such evaluations then could become the foundation for any necessary changes in the reading program which might effect program improvement.

Recommendation 2

Since it is possible that the first recommendation will not have any effect on principals who currently hold positions in Virginia's Middle Schools it is recommended that current principals who have no academic preparation in reading and/or who have no direct experience as a reading teacher, reading specialist or reading consultant be required to participate in a series of in-service courses or attend University classes which are concerned with the organization development and supervision of reading programs. The content of the course work should be determined cooperatively by the principals, school reading specialists, and university professors. By having the participants identify and describe the course content of the in-service workshops, the school administrative personnel will have an opportunity to define the course curriculum in terms of school problems and of course by using this procedure, the university personnel will be using the best procedures possible in light of what is known about in-service education.

Recommendation 3

Since it appears that most principals are reluctant to participate voluntarily in in-service or university course work relating to reading and reading program development, it is recommended that Virginia Association of School Administrators recommend to the State Department of Education and to the Virginia State Board of Education what the requirements for attaining certification and endorsement in school administration include specific requirements in reading and reading program development for all school administrators since reading is the foundation for the academic curriculum.

Recommendation 4

Since the middle school principals recognize the limitations in the current pre-service programs for preparing middle school subject matter teachers and have recommended that all subject matter teachers be required to take 3 to 6 hours of reading in the pre-service program—the authors of this report would like to re-emphasize the principals recommendation by also recommending that all subject matter middle school teachers be required to take 6 hours of reading instruction as part of their pre-service preparation.

Recommendation 5

That class size for severely disabled readers be reduced to 4 to 7 students per class since such students require highly individualized instruction in order to succeed in reading.

Recommendation 6

That some consideration be given to extending the required number of years of teaching experience at a given school level before an individual becomes eligible for a principalship at that level. A majority of the middle school principals had 3 years or less of experience before they were given an assignment as a principal. It is very doubtful whether such a limited number of years of experience would prepare any individual to contend with the many complex managerial problems which he (she) might encounter while running a middle school.